

PET PEEVES AND PRICELESS GEMS

by

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When I first thought of the idea for this article, I hadn't imagined the amount of feedback I'd get -- or the variety of responses. Pet peeves vary as much as story ideas, and the most important elements of writing is a theory that alters from editor to reader to author to agent. What I'm hoping to do is provide a contrast for the author to enable her to better pinpoint what makes her book special, and therefore better understand the perspective of readers, editors, and agents.

Some of the responses will make you smile, some will make you frown. But please remember that differences are what make our world so interesting -- and keeps our careers from going stale.

I started with the authors themselves, and it seems, like readers, we all have our pet peeves. In the interest of intimacy, I'm going to include several names in relationship with their comments. But because of the overwhelming response, I cannot list all individual replies.

These first comments made me smile, because I've seen the problems so often myself. Lee Smith: "When the heroine is incredibly lucky. The bad guy shoots everyone in sight -- but then conveniently ties up the heroine so she is able to escape. And in an effort to show spunkiness, the heroine then does something stupid, while the reader is screaming, "Call the cops! Call the cops!"

April Kihlstrom agreed with her: Pet peeve? "Stupid characters who do stupid things."

Victoria Alexander: "Constant misunderstandings between the hero & heroine. I want to smack them both."

Cheryl St. John: "Unjustified anger and "foot-stomping" as conflict."

Sharon Antonietwicz: "Love scenes that involve body parts but no intimacy between the participants."

Deborah Camp: "Bird-brained heroines."

These all seem like pretty basic not-to-do flaws, but as we all know, we've seen them plenty of times. So probably overall, the first and foremost important part of writing is -- having good judgement. Know what works and when it works.

Other complaints included inconsistent POV switches, or head-hopping, mentioned by many of the authors, as well as poor motivation, cliched plot and slow pacing.

What the authors considered the most important element of writing was, overwhelmingly, characterization. A large number also cited dialogue and pacing, but most writers, it seems, concentrate most on creating believable, likeable characters. Emotional involvement with those characters, caring about them and their problems, is a must.

Readers, however, put a different slant on their preferences. After questioning twenty-three readers of various ages, I found they want, in this order: Fast pacing, fantasy, a high level of sensuality, a sexy alpha hero and a strong independent heroine. (A few remarked that they liked a "nicer" hero, but that response was marginal.)

Time and again, slow pacing was commented on as a strong dislike. It seems readers today don't have time to "wade through page after page of description" just to get back to the action. Readers also dislike repetition of both words and themes, unfamiliar words that seem out of place with the writers style and "jar" the reader, and plot holes. They don't like to be "stunned" with the ending, but neither do they like to predict it from page one.

Many of the agents I tried to query were still on vacation or too busy catching up to comment, but a few were able to respond.

Pam Hopkins from the Hopkins Literary Associates said her pet peeve is when the story actually starts on chapter four. "In other words, giving the reader extensive background or set-up in the beginning of the book. I want to be thrust into the story. It's a mistake I see much too often and can get in the way of identifying a story or writing style I might really like."

What tells her a book will work? "For me a book is most saleable when the characters come alive. I think it's a combination of the writer's voice, characterization and emotion. When it clicks, it's wonderful."

Ruth Kagle of the Rotrosen Agency said a "great story" is the bottom line. Which means you have to have characters you can empathize with. Her pet peeve is a reversal of the above. A story without strong motivation, no logical actions, no internal motivation. Without those things, you can't possibly understand the characters.

In structuring this article, I tried to decide some priority in listing the responses. In my own mind, I think there are a series of people or persons we have to please. First and foremost we need to please ourselves. If the writer finds a story uninteresting, I doubt she can give it the impact it needs to survive in today's market. Of course, we also need to know that market, because without reader appreciation, the author won't last. But keeping in mind the editor's power over buying and promoting a book, I thought they deserved to come last in the article, to give their thoughts a special significance.

I tried to get responses from many different houses and lines. Again, some of the editors were still on vacation, but quite a few were willing to contribute. I regret I can't supply everything that was said. Much of it was conversational, but still fascinating in content. However I did keep pretty tight notes, and so you'll be getting the gist of each interview.

Mary Teresa Hussey from Silhouette. Her pet peeve is something she sees all too often, and yet is a basic element of a romance. The hero and heroine don't interact fully, or they don't actually need each other. To make the plot work, the protagonist's relationship has to be the focal point of the story. The one element that can convince her to buy a book is compelling emotion. The writer has to evoke a strong emotional response in the reader.

Cathleen Treacy from Silhouette. Her pet peeve: books that don't make sense, where the writer has manipulated events to make the plot work and ignored the obvious. To her, a story needs a special spark between the hero and heroine. They both need to be strong characters and the book has to be about them.

Hillary Ross from Topaz Historicals. Bad writing and tired, cliched plots are two things Hillary supplied as pet peeves. She also added a personal note: Women dressed as men to fool the hero. As Hillary pointed out, not too many women could pass for men, and if they did, we wouldn't want them as heroines. In the same light, a man who could be fooled so easily is not really hero material. However, plots where the woman tries to pull it off, but is caught, are fun.

Dave Borcharding from Writers Digest Books. Dave doesn't actually edit romance books. He works more with how-to books. But after editing the Romance Writer's Sourcebook, where he interviewed many of the most popular romance writers today, he became a huge fan of romance. I thought his opinions would be interesting, especially since they're from a male perspective. "I guess my biggest pet peeve is a sloppy ending. You know, the book is clipping along really well, then all of the sudden the major conflict is resolved and the book ends. In romance, the hero and heroine are separated by a gargantuan misunderstanding or a dire predicament, only to have Uncle Joey or Fire Marshall Bill rescue them in a page." Dave thinks

characterization is the key to a good book. "In fact, if the characters are very well drawn, I'll almost forgive a muffed ending (almost). The whole center of the book is the characters -- without the hero and heroine, you have no romance! Ergo, the better the characterization, the better the story."

Malle Vallik at Harlequin. Malle, the Associate Senior Editor for Temptation and Love & Laughter, recognizes many stories sent to her after they've been rejected by the line they were written for. People target one line, get turned down, and for some reason think the lines are interchangeable. "They'll maybe add a joke or two, then submit to Love & Laughter." Her suggestion: Target your line. If you must revise a rejected manuscript to try to sell it elsewhere, make certain you know the line and that the material is made suitable for it.

Malle also commented on how often she receives synopses that start on the fourth chapter, rather than the beginning of a book.

To Malle, strong emotionally-driven characters are key, along with clean writing. Jennifer Enderlin from St. Martin's Press. As with many of the editors, Jennifer's pet peeves were the flip side of what she considered the most important selling tool of a manuscript: a strong voice. "If I can put it next to ten other pages and pick out the author, it's a good clean voice. This can be done either by the turn of a phrase, the way an image is created, or the story itself. But if the voice is generic with nothing distinctive in the way the work has been constructed, if it's banal, it won't matter how well written the story is or how strong the characters are. It's just another manuscript."

I saved this last comment for the ending, even though the "pet peeve" wasn't entirely centered on the writing element within the story. I think it's significant in that it's personal and gives insight into the editor's feelings, both as an editor, and simply as a person we know and work with. I hope you'll all agree.

Susan Sheppard at Harlequin. Susan is an editor for Temptation. When asked what makes her buy a book? "My gut. I don't care about punctuation and grammar if the characters come to life and I care about them. Editors want to be surprised and delighted. It's the ultimate bonus when you get surprise, delight and perfect grammar altogether. That only really happens when an author has a handle on her own voice. Too many authors, published and unpublished, get hung up on the formula and don't explore what could be their unique contribution to the genre. So, I look for originality and spark which are probably one and the same. I will never turn down a book that makes me cry. Nor one that makes me laugh out loud. Touch me and you're going to touch a million other women. It's a heady experience. That's what I'm looking for."

Her pet peeve? "Oh, where to begin. Ping-pong point of view because you can't fix it in the editing; characters who keep changing character to suit the situation; situations that keep changing to suit the characters.

"But actually, there's nothing that bugs me more than authors who seem to forget that editors are people. Owing to the economic climate, we are short staffed -- we juggle and work weekends. We often laugh about it because if we didn't laugh... The point is, we are not deliberately avoiding your manuscript that was sent three weeks ago. Believe me, I'm as interested in your success as you are, and the moment I can get to your work, I'll be in touch. So please, wait for that letter or phone call, and understand that you aren't the only one feeling the pressure. Even published authors have to cultivate a calmness around waiting these days, because that's just the way it is.